



**Fourth Pastoral Letter to the Clergy, Religious and Lay Faithful of the  
Archdiocese of Sydney  
during this time of COVID-19 Pandemic  
24 April 2020**

Χριστός ανέστη, Ἀληθῶς ανέστη! *Christus resurrexit, Resurrexit vere!* Christ is Risen, Truly He is Risen!

First of all, may I wish you all a very happy Easter. It will undoubtedly be one of the most memorable Holy Weeks and Easters we've ever celebrated.

For some weeks now (and I expect for some weeks to come) we've had no public Mass. Not gathering physically is hard for most people, since human beings are made for relationship, proximity, intimacy. It's especially hard for Catholics, as our religion is so sacramental, physical, palpable. We normally commune with brothers and sisters kneeling or standing all around us and with a God so tangible you can eat Him!

Being forced to separate was especially difficult in Holy Week. If there's any time we should be together as the People of God, it's surely amidst the jubilant Palm Sunday crowd waving palms and singing Hosanna. It's with the Lord as He washes His disciples' feet, institutes the Eucharist and agonizes in the garden on the night He was betrayed. It's with the dying Jesus on Good Friday, as we all 'creep to the Cross' and keep watch with Mary and John. And it's with the Risen Lord, His angels and saints (including our parish angels and saints) celebrating His triumphant rising at Easter. This year it was not to be, at least not in the ordinary way...

Might I say how impressed I've been by the flexibility, generosity and pastoral creativity that have been demonstrated by our clergy and lay faithful as they seek to lead and serve through the COVID19 pandemic and the strangest of Holy Weeks. There are so many reports of different initiatives undertaken by you, many of them adventures in the new evangelization as well as pastoral care. Your willingness to sublimate your own anxieties, frustrations, loneliness and grief, in order to serve people needing reassurance and relationship has been very impressive and truly made me proud.

Many pastors and lay volunteers have gone to extraordinary lengths to communicate with parishioners in other ways, e.g. by phone calls, emails, care packages, and so on. 34 of our parishes have regularly streamed Masses through the internet. Some are streaming Eucharistic Adoration or the Rosary, spiritual talks, youth catecheses and other activities as well. CatholicCare have coordinated our local volunteers doing shopping and other errands for those who are shut-in. Our schools are doing all they can to teach children at home, to look after those who are at school, and to relieve the fee burden upon those who are struggling. Our hospitals are caring for the sick – including those with COVID19 – and keeping those in aged care safe. Some Vinnies conferences have had more to do than ever. Our Archdiocesan coronavirus webpage is providing ideas and resources. In collaboration with government we've been doing our best to keep all our employees in work. And both our school principals and our clergy are meeting regularly by Zoom to support each other and share ideas. Might I commend you for all these acts of real service to our people.

The television broadcast of St Mary's Cathedral's Good Friday and Easter Sunday services, alongside the live-streaming, attracted over a million viewers each and more than half the TV audience on Easter morning. That was an extraordinary evangelical opportunity as well as two very important acts of worship. I record my gratitude to all our staff, the Abdallah and Sakr families, and the Seven Network who made this happen.

I've been asked to tell you a little of the experience. I prayed and tried my best to think of what Christ would have me say to such a diverse and rare audience, how best to connect with them, and how to lead them through our greatest mysteries. I was graced to have excellent helpers, including the two families grieving the loss of their children in a tragic accident with whom I especially wanted to share the grace of Easter. It was strange preaching to a camera but an opportunity for an intimacy normally impossible in such a spacious cathedral. We had to pare down the liturgy, vary our usual musical diet somewhat, and keep the action extremely tight to fit the biggest liturgies of the year into an hour. But we were able to share something of the sheer beauty of our liturgical tradition and the Good News of Christ's Passion and Resurrection. I hope we can do more of this post-COVID19. While streamed or broadcast Mass is no substitute for physical presence with each other, and above all for sacramental communion, it does give us privileged access to peoples' homes and lives. Thank you for having me into your lounge rooms!

Since the Easter broadcasts I've had an extraordinary number of encouraging cards and letters from ordinary people across Australia. A Victorian couple wrote: "Even though we've not been to Mass for a long time now because of our age, we both felt that we were very much part of the service and felt very enriched by it... Everything was just perfect, the choir, singing, organ, liturgy and of course the cathedral itself, which we'd not been in since our honeymoon in Sydney fifty years ago." Another person wrote: "It was more than fitting to have Mrs Leila Abdallah do the second reading today. She's an inspiration with her spiritual strength to someone like me who often struggles with my Catholic beliefs." And another wrote:

“It was so uplifting to be able to attend despite church closures. Sad that we can’t receive Jesus in person or spend face to face time with Him at adoration, but it is very heartening knowing Mass, our lifeline, is said daily by priests – our unsung heroes.”

I’m hugely encouraged that thousands are still gathering through broadcast and streamed services, making a spiritual communion where they cannot make a sacramental one. If ‘absence makes the heart grow fonder’, it may be that, rather than becoming accustomed to doing Church from home, our hunger for the Eucharist will intensify and make us value all the more gathering for it when at last we can. In the meantime, we’ve been given a time of retreat to meditate upon what Holy Communion means to us all, and we’ve been given new opportunities and new pastoral strategies.

Looking ahead, I’m encouraged to hear that restrictions might be relaxed soon. On behalf of the Bishops of New South Wales, the clergy and the lay faithful I’ve written to the Premier pressing the case for the re-opening of churches, initially for private prayer and confession. It’s likely that such a ‘soft opening’ will happen before we can resume public Masses. And whether it’s for prayers or Mass, we are determined to abide by government directives regarding numbers, density (or distancing) and hygiene. Over these weeks we’ve demonstrated an admirable ability to adapt as necessary!

I’m confident that we have learnt a great deal through this time of pandemic and shut-down. As a gift to you at this time the Holy See has produced a free eBook *Strong in the Face of Tribulation*. I encourage you to download it and pray with it: <https://www.vaticannews.va/content/dam/lev/forti-nella-tribolazione/pdf/eng/strong-in-tribulation.-20042020.pdf>

With my blessings in this holiest of seasons and a promise of my continuing prayers,

Yours sincerely in Christ

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Anthony Fisher OP". The signature is written in a cursive style with a small cross at the beginning.

Most Rev. Anthony Fisher OP, DD BA LIB BTheol DPhil  
Archbishop of Sydney

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